

Robert Dessaix is a writer, literary commentator, translator and broadcaster. Having taught Russian language and literature for many years, he was ABC Radio National's weekly 'Books and Writing' presenter from 1985 to 1995. Acclaimed among his books are the autobiography *A Mothers Disgrace*, the novel *Night Letters* and a collection of essays and short stories (*and so forth*). A full time writer since 1995, Robert Dessaix currently lives in Melbourne.

If a writers work is said to represent the sum of many parts, those parts, in the case Robert Dessaix, surely reflect those an intriguing, engaging and somewhat enigmatic man.

Known to many readers as the erudite and charming-voiced former presenter of ABC Radio National's Books and Writing program, Robert Dessaix recently published his second novel, *Corfu*, in he wake of his critically acclaimed *Night Letters*.

While the subject matter of both novels remains apparently poles apart, a number of underlying themes inform Dessaix fiction and non-fiction. Accordingly, the themes of ordinariness and extraordinariness, travel, intimacy, the 'mundane' and the 'exotic', form many of the undercurrents which Dessaix draws heavily upon.

In *Corfu: A Novel*, Dessaix's ninth book, the obscure life of Kester Berwick (1903-92) - an Australian expatriate, theater aficionado, founder of the Ab-Intra Theatre Company, and author of the obscure novel *Head of Orpheus Singing* - is richly woven amongst an exotic backdrop of Corfu and Lesbos, observations on life, and mediations on various embellishments drawn from literature, art and history.

For Dessaix, both *Corfu* and *Night Letters*, in their own distinctive ways, represent an exploration of the twin themes of ordinariness/extrarordinariness that have preoccupied Dessaix's writing over the past few years. Indeed, for Dessaix, part of this quest has been to explore aspects, as the French term it, *un belle vie*, or the notion of a 'beautiful life' well lived.

Intimacy and the pursuit of intimacy, both in life and literature, is another aspect of Dessaix's work as a writer. Thus while Kester Berwick's life appears to have been "a flop" in terms of his achievements, Berwick's pursuit of deeper more intimate relationships is something that captivates Dessaix and motivates him to explore the theme of intimacy and what gives life substance. Indeed it is this theme that completes Dessaix notion of what makes up 'a beautiful life.'

Undoubtedly, Dessaix's writings are also informed and shaped by many of his own life experiences that have challenge notions of both mundane and the exotic. His middle-class suburban life growing up as an adopted child in the Sydney's Lane Cove, is later juxtaposed with his adventures as a student at Moscow State University in pursuit of his masters degree in Russian literature; a sense of the mundane and the exotic thus looms large in Dessaix's personal story. Indeed, his sense of rootless and fierce independence undoubtedly lead to the potential for exploring the world without the many of the traditional family attachments, "...a sense of not being anchored...left me free to imagine living anywhere I liked, being anything I liked...it's a wonderful beginning in life."

While Robert Dessaix's recent achievements as a fiction writer have solidified his reputation as an emerging force in contemporary force in Australian fiction, his autobiographical work *A Mother's Disgrace* was undoubtedly an important personal turning point in his emergence as a writer. It was this book that allowed Dessaix to break from his work as an academic writer and move to find his voice as a writer of broader non-fiction, and later, fiction works. Told with an almost brutal honesty, *A Mother's Disgrace* describes Dessaix's journey towards self-discovery, the search for identity and origins, his fascination with Russia and his travels from Kashmir to Peru on various study trips. Despite the confronting notion of revealing one's life before an ever-inquisitive public, Dessaix felt no need whatsoever to hold back in his telling even the most personal aspects of his own story "... I simply had things that I wanted to say and had very little shame [in telling them]... shame comes from a strong sense of family and I don't have a strong sense of family...In general I'm not ashamed and so I will tell you what ever needs to be told..."

Yet another side of Robert Dessaix's work that is perhaps less well known to many of his readers is his work in translation of a number of Russian works into English including *Turgenev: A Quest for Faith* and Chekhov's plays for performance by major Australian theater companies. Indeed, Dessaix speaks in almost ecstatic terms about the process of translation as by far the most personally satisfying and rewarding process connected with the art of writing, "...translating is the most amazing experience, particularly poetry."

In spite his acknowledged critical success as storyteller and writer of fiction, Dessaix still feels somewhat tentative about his voice in telling epic tales. Thus, he is a novelist who sees himself not as one given over the telling epic tales in the Tolstoyan tradition, but one who is a keen observer of themes within his immediate grasp. As Dessaix himself suggests "I know that my voice is not good at telling an extended story or a saga. I feel very insecure about the idea of telling a great tale over 300 pages..." He sees himself more as a painter of portraits than a photographer of detail. Moreover, he is also a writer that likes to feel close to his reader in the sense that the reader feels very much 'incorporated into' the storytelling process, "...I try to write non-fiction and fiction as if *you* are part of the story telling process ...[so that]...people feel invited in.

For Dessaix, writing is also making sense of things that he is anxious about "I usually writer best when I am anxious about something, when I'm confused about something, when I'm desperate to find the right words for something and I haven't been able to... it's like a really honest conversation with yourself."

So what inspires Robert Dessaix to begin a novel or a sustained writing project? In his words, it's a form of electricity that comes over him, a feeling that 'here is a story worth telling' and one that captivates and hold his attention, "... an electric current [comes over me]...here's a story that will embody the things that I'm actually interested in." Indeed he further emphasizes that this 'electricity' must also be "...between *something inside* and *something outside*."

Part of the process also involves consulting a large collection of notebooks that he has collected over the years. "Before I start I go through all my notebooks and type up on the computer things that might provide illumination for the book...and usually I will theme it."

While Robert Dessaix is now firmly established as a writer, there was never really a defining moment or decision on his behalf to become a full-time writer. In a sense he drifted into it having received Australia Council literature grants in the writing of both *Night Letters* and *Corfu*.

So what lies ahead for Robert Dessaix? He is currently in the process of leaving Melbourne for Tasmania where he is looking forward to new scenery and new creative horizons, “ I’m hoping in Tasmania I’ll be a little bit more attracted to history [in my writing]...although I’ll still have to wait for that magic moment before I write...We’ll just see.”

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